Year B All Saints

Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9

Psalm 24

Revelation 21:1-6a

John 11:32-44

Cynthia Knapp

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Come Holy Spirit, come. Come and fill us with your holy and life-giving Spirit that we might know your resurrection power in our lives now and forever. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen

The created order is full of testimony to the message of the gospel. One that could be the head of nature’s evangelism committee is the resurrection fern. You have seen it covering the branches of live oak trees. When it has rained its green frond make a thick carpet on the branches. But when there has been a period of drought the fronds curl up folding in on themselves and look dry and withered, even dead. While people and animals can only lose 10-20% of their water before they die, the resurrection fern can lose up to 97% of its water and go for years without rain. Then when the rain comes the ferns open out again as full and green as ever. Scientists are studying resurrection plants to try to develop crops that can thrive in difficult growing conditions like Africa where there are long periods of drought but many mouths to feed.

You will remember that in Scripture water is a symbol for the Spirit of God. Our Baptism service is filled with that understanding. We need the spirit of God to truly live just as all living things need water. We may be able to survive in our life on earth without God even for long periods of time but we cannot thrive without God. Like the resurrection plant our spirit withers without God but as soon as we receive the Spirit of God within we are restored to life and life everlasting.

Researchers have discovered similar evidence in studying the impact of depression on the brain. Someone suffering from depression and despair feels shut off or alienated from God if they even believe in God at all. It’s like a dark cloud has engulfed them causing them to feel spiritually isolated. An MRI taken of the brain of those who have experienced years of depression and despair shows that the prefrontal cortex has actually withered, shrinking from its normal size. Conversely an MRI taken of a person who has spent years in prayer and meditation actually shows a thickening of the same area of the brain. This is not true of a spirituality and religion characterized by hatred, judgment, and condemnation. It is only a spirituality focused on love and compassion that has this ability to strengthen and restore the brain. It is science discovering the impact of the Spirit of God on the brain, reversing decay and bringing new life.

We all know people who are not believers who seem to be thriving in life. They have trusted in things other than God and filled themselves with things other than the spirit of God. While they may seem to be fine temporarily these other things cannot be relied on and certainly don’t have the power to give us life beyond the grave.

One such man I knew had it all—degrees from the nation’s most prestigious universities, a wildly successful business career, a beautiful wife (his second one), several children, a luxurious home, an expensive car- you name it he had it. He told me he had no need for organized religion. It held no interest for him. He was ready to retire and enjoy the good life. He was happy with things the way they were. Until he found out his beautiful wife was having an affair-- with his best friend—and everything unraveled. In a moment his world came crashing in. He began to battle despair and depression. Suddenly he was facing the loss of all that was most dear to him and he didn’t know how to go on.

In our reading from the gospel of John Jesus is with some of his closest friends who are facing a terrible loss. Mary and Martha have buried their brother Lazarus, also loved by Jesus, and are in the middle of the seven days of deep mourning. There is an added tension here because the sisters know Jesus could have prevented this from happening and blame him for not arriving earlier. They know he could have healed their brother. They know he knew about it and delayed his return and they can’t fathom why. Now all hope is gone. They know he has resurrected the dead before but not after they have already been in the tomb for four days. By now his soul has left his body and his body has begun to decay. Even after stating they believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, that anything he asks of God will be done for him, and that he will raise them to everlasting life in the last day, still they draw the line at rolling away the stone from the grave. No. Please don’t. It’s too late. It would not be good. There would be a horrible, humiliating stench. There is really nothing that can be done. Just stay with us and grieve. He did. Jesus wept.

Have you ever been in one of those times when you can see absolutely no reason for hope? When all you can do is bury your dreams, roll the stone over the door, and mourn the loss? It could be the loss of a loved one, a career gone up in smoke, a devastating financial blow, or the death of a dream when door after door after door has been closed, when all attempts to succeed have failed. Sometimes it happens in an instant and sometimes it is a gradual process of wearing away our hope, but the impact is equally devastating. These are the kinds of things that bring us to the end of ourselves, leaving us in a state of despair, not knowing how we can possibly move forward.

In the Revelation given to John, he is told, “Now the dwelling of God is among men and He will live with them. They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more. For the old order of things have passed away.” The Lord says to him, “Behold I am making all things new.”

In spite of all of our striving, all of our seeking to take control of our lives and be masters of our own destiny, only God can roll the stone away and restore life to those places that have already come under the hold of death and decay. Only God can accomplish the work of the resurrection when all earthly hope is lost. Only God can give us hope for eternal life beyond the grave.

This was the concern of Jesus when he delayed returning to save his friend Lazarus. While he grieves over the loss of his friend and the suffering of Mary and Martha, it grieves him more that there are those who have been separated from the love and mercy of God and have not been able to receive the message he has been preaching about the good news of salvation. They have not been able to understand that he is indeed the Son of God. They need another sign unlike anything they have seen before. The burden of the eternal impact of sin weighs so heavily on him that he would allow his friends to go through terrible suffering if it meant more would come to believe when Lazarus was raised from the dead. This would surely demonstrate beyond a shadow of a doubt that he is indeed the Messiah, the Savior, who saves us even from the power of death and decay. Who but God can restore to life one who has been in the grave?

Truly God is with us in our suffering. It breaks his heart to see us grieving, to see us in a state of despair or hopelessness. He weeps with us when we weep but what we see as hopeless is never beyond hope with God. He is waiting for us to come to the end of our own self-sufficiency and call on him to help- to intervene in ways that only he can—to show us what he would make of our lives if only we would give him lordship and desire to live for him.

This is what happened with my friend and his wife whose marriage had gone up in smoke. It was only after they first each reconciled with God, confessing their own sin and seeking God’s forgiveness and the grace and transformation of his Holy Spirit that they were able to begin the work of reconciling with one another and rebuilding their marriage. It was rebuilt into a far better relationship and home life than it had ever been before. But it took the grace and forgiveness of Jesus at work in both of them and the power of God to heal for them to find their way forward so wonderfully together.

The Lord said, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.” This isn’t a statement about a timeline. It means that God is the source of all life and God is the finish line- the goal or culmination of all life. We are only able to experience the abundance of life promised to us by God when we are in God, when our relationship with God has been restored, reconciled through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and embraced by us as our reason for being. It requires something of us- a turning away from self and turning to the Lord.

I read in the Stratford magazine in a talk given by Robbo Hatcher at graduation that their mission is to challenge each student to live into their fullest potential. It’s a worthy goal. But it’s only through the power of God at work in us through his Holy Spirit that we can truly reach our fullest potential in life. Only through Jesus can we be made truly whole. Only he can break the hold of those things that would weigh so heavily on us or overcome those things we encounter that could derail us or shut us down. Only the power of God can roll the stone away and call us out of death into life, breathing his life-giving Spirit into us to make it happen. The sign of the raising of Lazarus from the dead was not just a demonstration of the hope of the resurrection to eternal life. It is a message for the hope that we have in God now for this life as well. He speaks with authority over those things in our lives that keep us from experiencing the love, joy, peace, and forgiveness that he has to offer us saying, Unbind him, and let him go. Unbind her, and let her go. Freed of those things that bind us he calls us to life.

Amen